

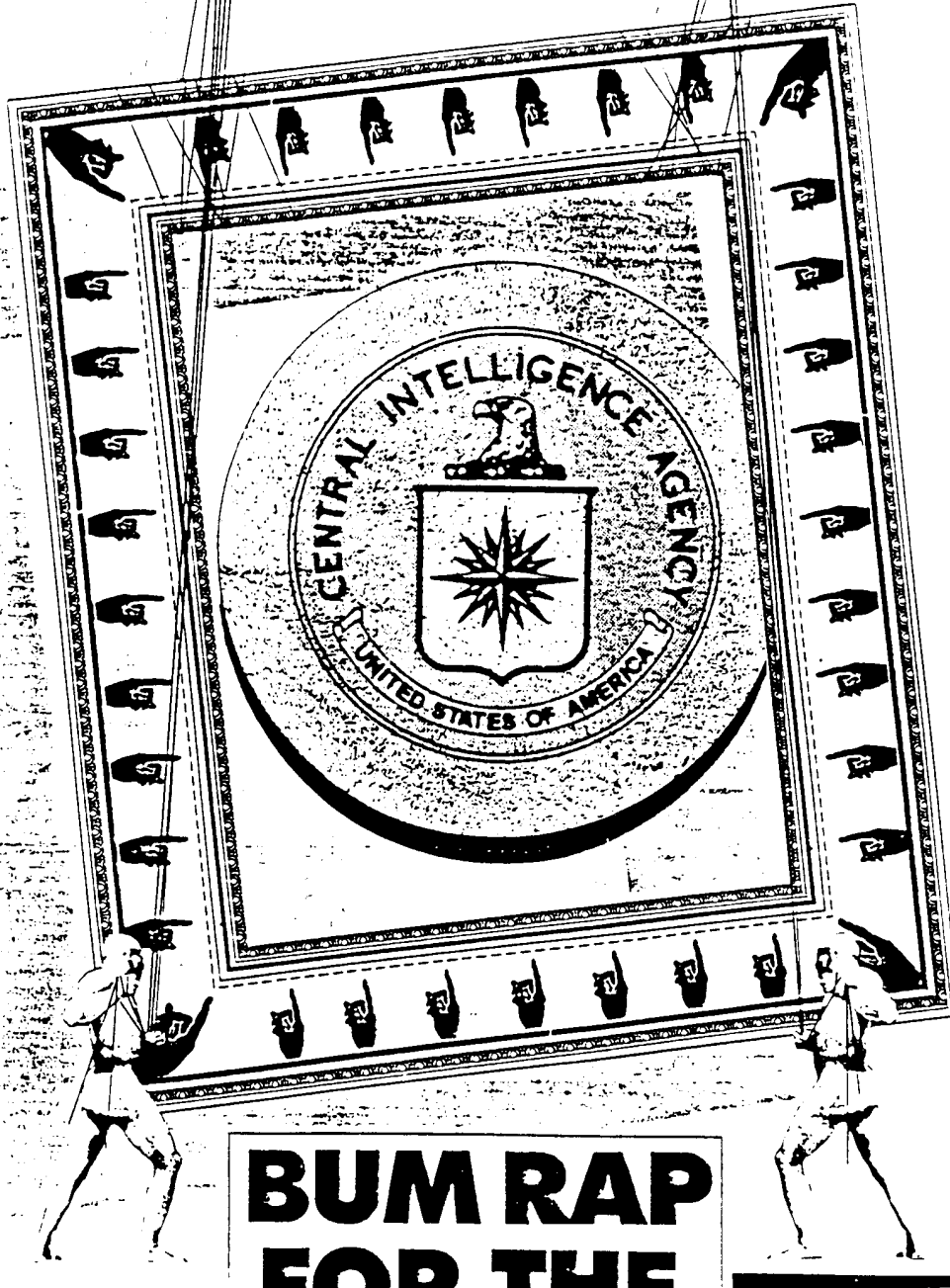
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COMMENTARY

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BUM RAP FOR THE CIA?

CONTINUED

After a headline story and a lead editorial in *The Washington Post* last week charging the CIA with indirect involvement in the murderous March 8 car bombing in Beirut, chants of "death to America" punctuated the funeral orations for the victims, and the State Department alerted U.S. Embassies in the Middle East to the danger of violent retaliation against Americans.

From the welter of accusations, denials, and explanations left behind by this journalistic coup, the real sequence of events is gradually beginning to emerge. As the roles and motives of the principal players become more clearly understood, the CIA appears to be more a victim of sensational journalism rather than an indirect accessory to a mass murder.

In contrast to the *Post's* implication of CIA involvement, all U.S. officials with knowledge of these events from Secretary of State George Shultz on down are unanimous in denying that the agency had any connection, direct or indirect, with the Lebanese intelligence team that arranged the car bombing.

All informed American officials agree that the CIA did not in any way train the Lebanese who planned and carried out the bombing nor did it have advance knowledge of the event. Typical of the official reaction is the comment by Robert B. Oakley, the director of the State Department's office for counterterrorism, who found the *Post's* handling of the story "outrageous."

But in retrospect it is easy to see how the *Post's* investigative reporters were led astray by startling discoveries they made after the bombing. For example, they unearthed for the first time the fact that President Reagan had secretly directed the CIA last December to train and support Lebanese intelligence teams for the purpose of using violent action to pre-empt and abort terrorist activity aimed at American targets.

As permitted by law in cases of extreme sensitivity, this presidential finding was reported not to the whole membership of the Senate and House Intelligence Committees, but only to their chairmen and vice chairmen. In spite of such extra precautions, this highly-secret information was somehow leaked to the *Post* either from the Congress or from the executive branch, and the leak has fueled a growing demand for a radical review of the whole congressional oversight process.

Meanwhile, with evidence of this top-secret presidential directive in hand, it was natural for the *Post* reporters to assume at least some indirect agency connection with the bombing attack on one of the suspected terrorist strongholds. But in fact no such connection existed for two separate reasons.

First, the top professional intelligence officers in the CIA had long been skeptical of any attempt to recruit and train anti-terrorist Lebanese hit squads for fear they might get out of control in the anarchy of a disintegrating society. Only very reluctantly did these intelligence pros accept the new responsibility, and they would have preferred concentrating on the counterintelligence penetration of the terrorist organizations as a better way of ensuring an effective defense.

Moreover, once the presidential order had been issued, the agency operators in the field found the Lebanese security services so fractured by political and religious rivalries that no recruitment or training had been undertaken by March 8 when the car bomb exploded. In a sense, this event was looked upon by CIA officers as a reprieve because it vividly demonstrated all the dangers of indiscriminate violence they had been predicting.

In the aftermath of the Beirut massacre, the presidential finding in favor of pre-emptive counterterrorism was rescinded and the agency let off the hook for having to carry it out.

One other facet of the American intelligence relationship with Lebanon may have misled the *Post* reporters. For more than 20 years, the CIA maintained a routine liaison relationship with Lebanese intelligence as with the intelligence services of other non-communist countries. An exchange of visits and some training was involved but this had nothing to do with recruiting and training counter-terror hit squads.

In the light of this background, it does seem that the *Post* story was inflated to suggest conclusions well beyond what the facts could support and that the CIA got a bum rap. In the process, American lives may have been needlessly endangered.

In fairness to the top editors of the *Post*, it should be pointed out that the press spokesman for the CIA strongly objected to the story when it was read to him 24 hours before publication. In the absence of CIA Director William Casey, the agency,

however, passed up the opportunity it was given to appeal up the line where the judgment might have been different once all the facts were on the table.

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